

News of the Madagascar Pochard

I have been in Madagascar again for the last couple of weeks with Nigel Jarrett and Mark (Sparky) Roberts from the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) to start our Madagascar pochard project. This species which was thought to have gone extinct in the 1990s and rediscovered by The Peregrine Fund in 2006, has a total population of about 20 ducks all located on a small lake complex in the north of Madagascar. This tiny number of ducks is highly vulnerable to any environmental change that may come and completely wipe out the last remaining population.



A collaborative effort between Durrell, WWT, The Peregrine Fund and the Government of Madagascar is now underway to save the species. This will establish a conservation-breeding programme that will, in time, reintroduce ducks to wetlands in the species' former range. During a reconnaissance visit in July it was clear that the situation was more critical than at first feared (a summary of that trip can be found at <http://blog.durrell.org/index.cfm/Madagascar>). Just six females were seen then, and all of the young that they had hatched in 2008 had died within a few weeks. It was clear that emergency action was needed. So in October, I headed back out to Madagascar with Nigel and Sparky to bring some hatching eggs into captivity and start a conservation breeding programme. Kassidi (duck finder extraordinaire from our Madagascar office) had been installed at the lake to watch the females and record when eggs were laid and when incubation started. Kassidi sent out regular updates (after climbing the nearby ridge to get very patchy cellphone coverage) and we were able to plot the news on a calendar and judge exactly when eggs would hatch and, therefore, when we would need to collect them. From there on it was safe to say that it was quite an ordeal and a race against time.



The team from the UK were hit by a number of delays. First electrical storms stopped us getting into the island for a couple of days as we were routed back to Nairobi (where we did receive accommodation in a 5* hotel and I ticked white rhino!), then roadworks on the only bridge with access to the north of the Island caused another three days of delays and finally once the team got there we started succumbing to various illnesses (including swine flu) – making us quite a sorry bunch indeed.



However, we arrived just time. Arriving at night we set up our own tents and a much large one for incubators etc during the following morning. We got our first views of the wonderful lake and the pochards at dawn (and watched nesting Madagascar harriers hunting the lake edge). The nest we were after first was due on this first day and with extreme trepidation, and in full view of local village dignitaries, we canoed into the marsh and collected the clutch (nine eggs). The eggs were spot on and ready to hatch. Moved to the big tent, the eggs started to hatch before our eyes. A total of eight chicks hatched and now it was time to get them to a temporary rearing facility that was being hastily constructed at a nearby hotel! We then spent a gruelling and very slow (it took eight hours!) drive on rough mountain track to get onto the main road to the hotel and arriving late in the evening were able to transfer the ducklings to their imported holding facility (tanks were shipped out from UK). The tiny, very calm ducklings got their first wash and drink from a sandwich box by the side of the road. They could not have been easier to transport and our fears about their willingness to travel long bumpy roads were unnecessary. However, if the rains had started!



This is really a huge accomplishment given that the total population is only 20 ducks, we have now got eight ducklings that will be reared with extreme care and attention. There are also a further two clutches that we will hopefully add. But this is only the beginning and this will be a long term project for Durrell, WWT and The Peregrine Fund over the next coming years to build

up a healthy captive population, identify areas for release, and to manage and protect these key habitats for the species. We will provide regular updates from the project on the blog. <http://blog.durrell.org>.

